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SUBJECT: FM OSKANIAN BLASTS GUL FOR MOSCOW COMMENTS ON
ARMENIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS

REF: A) YEREVAN 1371 B) YEREVAN 1414 C) ANKARA 5562

Classified By: Poloff Masha Herbst for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) FM Oskanian responded November 4 to Turkish FM Gul's remarks to RFE/RL on Turkish-Armenian relations. Oskanian's statement rebuked Turkey for ignoring President Kocharian's April 2005 response to PM Erdogan's historical commission proposal, and for Turkey's renewed insistence on the historical commission as the only way forward on bilateral relations. Oskanian's statement renews Armenia's call for immediate normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries "without pre-conditions." Complete text of Oskanian's statement is contained in paragraph 7. END SUMMARY.

ARMENIAN PRESS SPIN GUL'S MOSCOW REMARKS

¶2. (C) Oskanian's remarks follow broad Armenian media coverage of Turkish FM Gul's comments in Moscow to RFE/RL's Armenia correspondent. Armenialiberty.org (the local RFE/RL affiliate) reported November 1 that Gul "insists on the idea of setting up a commission of Turkish and Armenian historians, which was floated by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in a letter to President Kocharian last year." Gul's actual words quoted directly in the RFE/RL piece are more moderate, noting that Turkey hadn't "received a positive response" from Armenia to Erdogan's proposal, while commenting that Turkish leaders "wish to establish good neighborly relations with Armenia, but there are some political problems." (COMMENT: Not having seen a full transcript of Gul's Moscow comments to the Armenia Liberty correspondent, we cannot rule out that the outlet put a more negative cast on Gul's remarks than his words warranted. However, the Armenian MFA seems to have taken Gul's comments as a gratuitous broadside against Armenia, unfair in light of the state of play from the Armenian perspective (reftels). END COMMENT.)

ON OPEN BORDERS

¶3. (U) Oskanian said the GOAM was "amazed" that Erdogan had never responded to Kocharian's April 2005 letter, "simply because the Turkish authorities did not like the response contained therein, and do not wish to broaden the scope of

discussion beyond history." He questioned whether the Turkish insistence on the historical commission was genuine, noting that Armenia had agreed to discuss all issues in the context of open borders.

¶4. (U) Oskanian maligned as "disingenuous" Turkish FM Abdullah Gul's recent comments to RFE/RL (Armenia Liberty) suggesting that the presence of Armenian citizens in Turkey and the existence of a direct Yerevan-Istanbul flight prove that the border is already "essentially open." He accused Gul of exaggerating the number of Armenian citizens who live and work in Turkey, and said a direct flight alone did not an open border make.

ON "GENOCIDE"

¶5. (U) Retreating slightly from his assurances earlier in the statement that Armenia is open to discussion on "all issues," Oskanian said that, until the GOT abolished a Turkish statute criminalizing discussion of the "genocide," the GOAM would not take seriously an invitation to open dialogue. He added that there are Turkish scholars outside Turkey who agreed with Armenia that the Turks had perpetrated a genocide of Armenians in 1915. "The most notable among these is the May 2006 letter to Prime Minister Erdogan by the International Association of Genocide Scholars, wherein they collectively and unanimously affirmed the fact of the Genocide and called on the Turkish government to acknowledge the responsibility of a previous agreement," Oskanian said.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) The Armenian perception (as noted in Ref B) remains that the Turkish side is uninterested in serious dialogue with Armenia, but hopes only to create the impression of reaching out to Armenia as a tactic to relieve European pressure. Armenian leaders want to normalize relations with Turkey as a step toward their main interest, which is opening the Turkish border to normal trade. The GOT insistence on debating the history of the Armenian massacres before anything else (a pointless and polarizing exercise in Armenian eyes), looks like a Turkish stall tactic to Yerevan. The GOAM certainly has no desire to help Turkey "off the hook" in the court of European opinion -- Armenia's only real leverage in the Turkish dispute -- in the absence of serious Turkish intent to move toward normalization and open trade relations. So long as Armenians think that Turkey seeks only to distract, deflect and point-score off of its Armenian neighbor, the GOAM is perfectly willing to respond in like manner.

¶7. (U) Complete Text of FM Oskanian's statement:

We remain amazed that a letter sent by President Kocharian to Prime Minister Erdogan in April 2005 remains ignored, simply because the Turkish authorities did not like the response contained therein, and do not wish to broaden the scope of discussion beyond history.

President Kocharian clearly said to Prime Minister Erdogan that the "suggestion to address the past cannot be effective if it deflects from addressing the present and the future. In order to engage in a useful dialogue, we need to create the appropriate and conducive political environment. It is the responsibility of governments to develop bilateral relations and we do not have the right to delegate that responsibility to historians. That is why we have proposed and propose again that, without preconditions, we establish normal relations between our two countries."

In that context, President Kocharian said, "an

intergovernmental commission can meet to discuss any and all outstanding issues between our two nations, with the aim of resolving them and coming to an understanding."

Foreign Minister Gul,s recent comments to Radio Liberty, insisting that the existence of flights between Armenia and Turkey, and of Armenian citizens in Turkey, is evidence that "the borders are essentially open" is disingenuous.

First, the number of Armenians from Armenia living and working in Turkey do not approach the numbers he claims. Second, open borders assumes direct contacts between peoples, unobstructed relations across the border, and a functioning transport infrastructure.

We stand by our response, which we consider to be a positive one, and we wonder whether the Turkish insistence on a historical commission is genuine. After all, we have in fact agreed to discussions on all issues, in the context of open borders.

Further, so long as Article 301, which criminalizes mere discussion of the genocide topic, remains on the books in Turkey, an invitation to open dialogue cannot be taken seriously. Finally, outside Turkey, scholars -- Armenians, Turks and others -- have studied these issues and have reached their own independent conclusions.

The most notable among these is the May 2006 letter to Prime Minister Erdogan by the International Association of Genocide Scholars, wherein they collectively and unanimously affirmed the fact of the genocide and called on the Turkish government to acknowledge the responsibility of a previous government.

In light of these complex realities, we can only repeat our readiness to enter into dialogue and normal relations with our neighbor.
GODFREY